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January 6, 2005

The Honorable Dennis Hastert, Speaker
United States House of Representatives
H 232 Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

RE: House Reorganization of Authorizing Committees involving FEMA programs

Dear Mr. Speaker:

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is one of the 22 departments and agencies that were combined to create the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), where the primary mission is to protect the nation against terrorism. The effectiveness of FEMA's all hazards programs is increasingly threatened with regard to natural disasters.

As you are well aware, the Congress is in the process of reorganizing itself to better consider homeland security issues. The Department of Homeland Security is now 2 years old. As the organization of the DHS itself and Congressional reorganization are considered, the Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) urges you to make sure that natural hazards programs retain their integrity and, therefore, their effectiveness.

The Association of State Floodplain Managers is an organization of nearly 7,000 professionals involved in floodplain management, flood hazard mitigation, the National Flood Insurance Program, flood preparedness, warning and recovery and the multi-objective management of our nation's floodplains and waterways. ASFPM is a respected voice in floodplain management practice and policy in the United States. It represents the flood hazard specialists of local, state and federal government, the private sector, the research community, the insurance industry, and the professional disciplines of engineering, planning, hydrologic forecasting, emergency response, water resources, and others.

FEMA, since its creation, had matured into an organization that became recognized for effectiveness in carrying out its mission – preparing for, responding to, recovering from, and mitigating against all hazards. Natural disasters are the most frequent and, cumulatively, most costly disasters, including terrorist events. FEMA had established a reputation for nimble responsiveness. This was closely related to the agency's capacity for flexibility and especially well coordinated, genuine give-and-take partnerships with states and localities. In addition to supporting responsiveness, these factors also allowed FEMA to develop well conceived programs promoting hazard mitigation. Such programs sought to permanently break the cycle, after a disaster event, of damage/rebuild/damage since much of the recovery and repair costs were borne by taxpayers. After the terrorist attacks on September 11th and FEMA's inclusion into the Department of Homeland Security, this began to change.

Dedicated to reducing flood losses in the nation.

The ASFPM has been concerned from the beginning that inclusion of FEMA in DHS might not bode well for the progress the nation has made in reducing the nation's risk to natural hazards. We fully recognize the need for our national emphasis on terrorism; however, the effectiveness of natural hazards programs and the all-hazards concept must not be sacrificed in the process. Due to the sheer number magnitude of impact of natural disasters, FEMA's work is more heavily focused on these events.

The ASFPM is not the only organization that has these concerns. The General Accounting Office, in its September 2003 report, said the following:

Moreover, the placement of FEMA within DHS represents a substantially changed environment in which FEMA will conduct its missions in the future, and missions that focus on reducing the impacts of natural hazards, such as hazard mitigation and flood insurance, may receive decreased emphasis. Sustained attention to these programs will be needed to ensure they maintain or improve their effectiveness in protecting the nation against, and reducing federal costs associated with, natural disasters.

It should not be surprising that there is concern about FEMA's organizational structure or its loss of focus on a multi-hazard mission – it is merely a continuation of the debate that began in Congress when DHS was created. The House Judiciary Committee and the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committees had misgivings about the inclusion of FEMA in DHS and both recommended that FEMA remain an independent agency to preserve the traditional mission of FEMA. Also, a Brookings Institution analysis in 2002 raised concern that much of the progress FEMA has made over two decades could be reversed.

Since FEMA has become part of the Department of Homeland Security, it has been a struggle. Funds have been raided, staff have been transferred into other DHS functions without being replaced, slowdowns because of added layers of bureaucracy for nearly all functions have dramatically increased, and there is the constant threat of reprogramming appropriated funds. Strongly felt worries about such matters led the ASFPM Board of Directors, in August 2004, to pass a resolution recognizing FEMA's accomplishments and its challenges. The resolution calls for FEMA to be removed from the Department of Homeland Security and for its ability to report directly to the President to be restored. The Board, made up of state and local officials, felt strongly that FEMA doesn't have to be part of a larger agency to share its expertise and utilize its network of state and local officials for all hazards management. If FEMA is pulled apart, doesn't have a direct link to the President, and cannot communicate effectively with Congress, all of the progress made over the last 15 years could be for naught.

The Association of State Floodplain Managers recommends that 1) Congressional reorganization for homeland security reflect attention to the importance of natural disaster programs and policies and that 2) the Congress undertake an evaluation of the structure of DHS and FEMA as it affects retention of an effective capacity for natural hazards response and mitigation programs.

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Natural disasters impact Americans every single day. In 2004, 35 states had Presidentially declared disasters – all as a result of natural hazards. Please do not allow the agency that is in the forefront of dealing with these hazards to be made less effective or pulled apart altogether. Please make certain that the Congressional structure reflects appropriate attention to the frequency and the magnitude of impact of natural disasters. If you have any questions or comments, do not hesitate to contact Larry Larson, ASFPM Executive Director, or myself.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chad Berginnis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Chad Berginnis, CFM

Chair

Enclosure